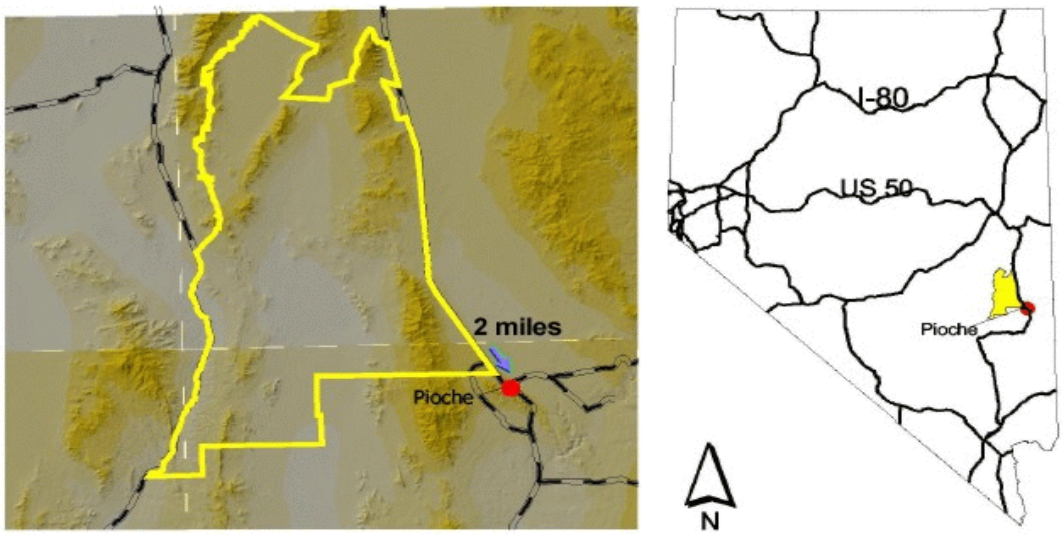
Dry Lake Herd Management Area
Lincoln County, Nevada

Location/Habitat

The Dry Lake Herd Management Area (HMA) is located just a few miles west of the town of Pioche in Lincoln County, Nevada. Pioche is a frontier mining town established in the mid 1800s. It is approximately 30 miles south of Lund. The Dry Lake HMA encompasses 494,335 acres. The major land features in the HMA are Dry Lake, Muleshoe, and Cave Valleys bounded on the east and west by the Schell Creek, Pahroc, Bristol, and Fairview mountain ranges. No major streams flow in the area, but several small artesian springs and fresh water seeps occur throughout the HMA mostly in the mountains and along the mountain edges. The majority of the HMA is dry Great Basin desert. Elevation ranges from approximately 4,600 feet in Dry Lake Valley to 8,929 feet on Roe Peak in the Bristol Range.

The climate is arid to semiarid, which is typical of the Great Basin. Annual average precipitation varies from approximately 16+ inches at the higher elevations to 8 inches or less at the lower elevations. The bulk of the precipitation occurs through early spring rains and winter snows. Temperatures range from summer maximums in excess of 100 degrees Fahrenheit to winter lows falling well below zero.

The Dry Lake HMA sustains a variety of public land uses. These uses include: hiking, camping, hunting, firewood cutting, off-road vehicle touring, pine nut harvesting, livestock grazing and mining. Some of the major wildlife found in the HMA include: mule deer, elk, pronghorn antelope, mountain lions, coyotes, bobcats and kit foxes. Birds include: sage grouse, blue grouse, chukar, golden eagles, several species of neo-tropical birds, and occasionally in the winter, bald eagles. Smaller animals common to the area include cottontail rabbits, badgers, black-tailed jackrabbits and several species of ground squirrels.



Vegetation

Major ecosystems/plant communities in the area are the pinyon-juniper woodland in the mountains and the salt desert shrub communities in the valleys. The salt desert shrub community is composed of two major vegetative zones, the shadscale and the sagebrush.

The pinyon-juniper zone, scattered throughout the area, generally occurs above 6,000 feet elevation within and surrounding the mountain ranges. Stands of these pinyon pine and juniper trees vary in density from scattered to closed (solid) stands. A few isolated and ancient ponderosa pine stands and several aspen groves dot the higher elevations. This zone provides summer range for the wild horses and elk.

The shadscale zone is found mostly in the bottom of the valleys. Plants have adapted to the very arid saline soils of the valleys. Important plants are shadscale, winterfat, black sagebrush and black greasewood. This zone serves as important winter range for wild horses, livestock, and a year-round population of pronghorn antelope.

The sagebrush zone is scattered throughout the area, roughly occurring between 5,500 feet and 7,000 feet elevation where soils are less salty and more gravelly in nature. The big sagebrush zone provides an important source of perennial grasses and forbs from which the wildlife of the area derive a majority of their nutrition.

Throughout each of these zones, small riparian areas (wet/green) occur with seeps, springs and creeks. Vegetation found in these areas can be found no where else in the ecosystem due to the lack of water. Plants include rushes, sedges, deciduous trees and willows. Riparian areas are the most essential components to life in the cold deserts of Nevada, and every species that exists there is dependent on it.

Herd Description

The area is currently being managed for wild horses by the Ely Field Office to maintain a viable healthy population of 94 horses. In order to maintain a thriving natural ecological balance, the Dry Lake HMA is gathered periodically to reduce the number of wild horses roaming the management area. The Dry Lake HMA was first gathered in August 1993, and was again gathered in 1996. The total number of wild horses removed from this management area between 1985 and 1999 is 452 horses. These horses were placed into the national wild horse and burro adoption program. Dry Lake wild horses posses a variety of colors with variations from white to black and all shades in between. The herd contains a preponderance of sorrels, bays and blacks.

History of wild horses in the area before 1971 has not been very well documented. The wild horses which inhabit the area are believed to have mostly descended from horses which escaped or were turned loose for various reasons by ranchers, miners and settlers. There is some evidence that the Army Remount Service was active in at least part of the area. When they were in operation during the early 1900s through 1940, remount stallions of various breeds were released on the range to upgrade the existing herd. These stallions were mainly thoroughbreds or Morgans, but a few draft blood lines were introduced to develop a hardier strain for pulling supply wagons and heavy artillery. Existing stallions were sometimes shot to allow breeding dominance by the remount stallions.

Wild horses on the range today are well adapted to the harsh environment they inhabit. Dry Lake wild horses are generally smaller and sturdier than domestic horses, though very large specimens are captured regularly. Wild horses use the HMA on a yearlong basis. They primarily graze in the valleys during the winter and early spring. They will stay in the pinyon-juniper zone on the lower benches during the day

and graze in the valley bottoms in the evening and early morning. During open winter when there is little snow in the mountains, the horses will stay higher on the mountain slopes and will not move down into the valleys. Wild horses can be found at all elevations during the warmer summer months.

The wild horses prefer to eat bunchgrasses, but may shift to a diet of mostly shrubs during the winter. White sage (also known as winterfat) grows in the silty valley bottoms where the horses tend to congregate in the winter months.

Foals are generally born in the spring when new green grass is plentiful. Generally, wild horses are sound and healthy, having been subjected to the rigors of natural selection which sort out only the toughest animals.

The herd is comprised of numerous smaller bands ranging in size from one animal (rare) to bands of more than twenty animals. Wild horses exhibit a fairly complex social structure. Typically a band will consist of one stallion and one to several mares with their offspring. Bands are stable family units, and commonly reunite after a wild horse gather although they do interact and change members occasionally. The stud horse (stallion) will vigorously defend his mares against other studs through a complex series of gestures, body stances and physical combat. A young colt (a male) will generally stay in its family band until it reaches two to three years of age. It may then be driven out of the band by the dominant stud or will choose to leave the band to search for its own harem of mares. Often young studs will form bachelor bands. Bachelor bands are very loose associations of young studs which apparently form to satisfy the need for social contact and mutual protection. Young studs may remain in bachelor bands until they mature enough to establish their own harem of mares. Young studs will sometimes be tolerated by other bands but have low social status. Young fillies (females) will often stay in their family bands for longer periods of time than the young studs, but they will eventually either wander off to seek a new band or will be stolen by a different stud horse and incorporated into a new band.